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Tanagra Terra-Cottas of the Fourth Century*

THE interest of the Tanagra statuettes is so obvious that it is quite possible to enjoy them without reference to their historical association and their technique. Yet, since they are the product of a minor art, and, in a museum of varied and greater interests, are easily overlooked, there is an excuse for calling attention to them, especially valid in view of the high quality of the Boston collection.[†] The best of the Tanagra terra-cottas in the Museum are shown in the Fourth Century Room. Their character as an expression of Hellenic civilization in one of its later phases is not without significance, and some consideration of the process by which they were made will emphasize their technical excellence, as compared with the technique of other ancient and modern terra-cottas. One is surprised by the variety of entertaining types which these figures present, and by the conscientiousness and skill of the almost despised craftsmen who made them.

Forty years ago these figures began to appear in the hands of dealers in antiquities. They soon attracted the interest of a circle much wider than that of archaeologists and connoisseurs, for they reflected the life of ancient Greece with irresistible vivacity and grace, in a less serious fashion indeed than the monumental arts, but hardly less faithfully within their own range of expressiveness. Although they were recovered from the soil surreptitiously by diggers who intentionally concealed their source of supply, it became known that these statuettes were found on the site of ancient Tanagra, or rather in the cemeteries which surrounded it. Official excavations, however, could not be undertaken until the best of the terra-cottas had already been carried off, most of them to enrich the public and private collections of Northern Europe. The name of Tanagra has clung to

them, and the place may indeed have been that of their manufacture, though dependent for type and style on the taste of some greater centre, almost certainly Athens.

Tanagra was an important town of Boeotia, near the borders of Athenian territory. It lay on a hill overlooking the valley of the Boeotian river Asopus, with a view across uneven but low country to the straits of Euripus and the rugged mountains of Euboea. Some twenty-five miles north of Athens and twelve miles east of Thebes, it was a point on one of the main lines of travel and trade between the two cities, and again, on the route of trade between Thebes and the prosperous towns of Euboea. The

road from Athens to Thebes by way of Tanagra was traversed by an amusing observer of local traits at some time in the second century B. C. He has left this often-quoted account of Tanagra:

"The city stands on high and rugged ground. Its aspect is white and chalky, but the houses, with their porches and encaustic paintings, give it a very pretty appearance. The corn of the district is not very plentiful, but the wine is the best in Boeotia. The people are well-to-do, but simple in their way of life. All are farmers, not artisans. They practise justice, good faith and hospitality."^{*}

This is a pleasant picture of the town and its people, but what of these thousands of graceful clay figures which the mourners of Tanagra buried with their dead? Were they made in Tanagra or imported? It is surprising to read that the people are all "farmers, not artisans." But it must be remembered that the date of this travel sketch is some two centuries later than that of the figurines, and that the condition

of the people may have altered during a period which saw many political and social changes in Greece, the rise and fall of Macedonian and other foreign supremacies, the final domination of Rome. In the fourth century Tanagra may have had her artisans.

Pausanias, the traveller who wrote of Greece in the time of Marcus Aurelius, when the country was already one of antiquarian rather than contemporary interest, tells hardly more of Tanagra. He describes the temples and cults of the city, decently separated from its secular life, he reminds us that

* Conference given at the Museum March 16, 1911; repeated March 18. The discussion embodies and summarizes facts and theories which are generally known to archaeologists. Readers who are interested in the subject will consult Winter's "*Typen der figürlichen Terra-cotten*," and will read Pottier's "*Les statuettes de terre cuite dans l'antiquité*," or his shorter but better illustrated book, "*Diphilos et les modelleurs de terres cuites grecques*."

† Almost the entire series was acquired for the Museum by special contribution in 1901. All of the illustrations are from figurines in the Museum collection.

* The translation is borrowed from Frazer's *Pausanias*, Vol. I, p. xlv.



2— *Terra-cotta Mould*

Tanagra was the city of Corinna, the lyric poet, but he is silent about the arts and industries of the place. The very memory of them had probably faded before his time.

Certain historical facts, however, have been made clear by the modern excavations. We learn that the highways leading from Tanagra were bordered with graves for long distances, like those of many another anciently populated city, whose dead became, as one generation after another passed, a great surrounding army, encamped along the approaches to the walls of the living. No really imposing tombs were discovered. The statuettes with which we are chiefly concerned here were found in and about graves whose other contents showed that they belonged to the fourth century B. C., and probably rather to the later than the earlier half of the century. Other statuettes of earlier styles and of distinctly religious significance were indeed found in considerable numbers in the earlier graves; but the particular group which we are now considering is to be dated, roughly, from 350 to 250 B. C.; and these far outnumber the earlier terra-cottas. The cause of the especially lavish bestowal of statuettes in the graves of this period can hardly be ascertained. It may be surmised that as the manufacture of painted vases, often used in the same way, had declined, terra-cotta statuettes took their place in the graves.

The figurines were not, it seems, precious or rare. Some were placed beside the dead, and many more were found outside the grave, often intentionally broken — a fact which has led one anthropologist* to suggest that in the dedication of these gay little figures we are to see a survival, it may be unconscious, of some primitive practice of human sacrifice. To the disputed subject of the purpose and significance of the figures, in connection with ceremonies of burial, we must return at a later point.

From the uncertainties of the motive of their use, we pass with some satisfaction to the material facts, to the figures themselves and the making of them — a process in which free design and modelling were cleverly combined with mechanical reproduction. We are to imagine the manufacturer of terra-cottas — coroplast, or dollmaker, the Greeks called him — at work. He has before him a model to be reproduced, a freely moulded statuette of clay or wax, obtained, perhaps, from some more gifted craftsman, a sculptor in a small way. From this figure he makes a mould in clay, or perhaps two moulds, one for the front, one for the back, or even more, if the composition of the figure is complicated. The head is usually moulded separately. These intaglio impressions or negatives are taken, in a fairly thick mass of clay, strong enough to resist some pressure when they have been baked. The moulds are hardened in the oven. No factories or ateliers have been found at Tanagra, and we have none of the original moulds of these figurines. Such moulds, however, have been found on other Greek sites, and a few examples in the collection of the Museum, now in the Terra-Cotta Room (Cases 5, 7, and Figure 2), will show what they were.

When the mould is ready, the coroplast may, of course, multiply copies of his original model as long

* Frazer, Pausanias, Vol. V, p. 81.





4 — Corinthian Figurine

as the mould will stand the wear and tear of use. This is the one purely mechanical stage in the making of the figurines. The maker of images takes carefully purified clay and presses it into all the depressions of the mould in a thin layer; he adds other layers, to give sufficient strength to the walls of the figure. The clay dries and hardens in the sun, until, with the contraction due to evaporation, it is easily removed from the mould. The coroplast then assembles the parts of his figure, and if the back has been moulded, it is attached to the front, the juncture smoothed and washed over with a little clay. Often the back is not moulded, but supplied in the form of a rough and ready mass of clay, obviously not meant to be seen. The Tanagra figures are usually attached to a thin, square plinth as a base.

With the joining of the parts the element of original design again appears. Supposing that, as is usually the case, the head is moulded separately from the body: it is evident that the coroplast, who has a variety of moulds, may choose the head in each instance; and again, that he may vary the expression of the figure by the attitude, the turn or inclination which he gives to the head.* And at

* See Figure 3, which illustrates two statuettes which are apparently made from the same mould, but with different heads.

Tanagra individual attention to the statuette did not end here. The surface had remained ductile, or was again made so; and the last refinements of modelling in the drapery, the face, and the hair were produced by the use of a tool in the artist's hand. In this way the features which came from the mould too vague and undecided were made more definite and more expressive; the hair was marked with deep incisions, which heightened the illusion of texture and mass; the finer folds of the dress received necessary emphasis. It is this careful attention to the execution of each figure which distinguishes the makers of the Tanagra statuettes above those of other well-known classes of terra-cottas.*

When the statuette had received its final touches with the tool, it was baked in an oven at not too high a temperature. The square or oval opening which is left in the backs of most of the figurines was intended to allow the escape of moisture in the baking, since imprisoned steam and gases might otherwise have broken them.

After firing the figure was invariably colored. It was first covered with a wash of white clay as a ground for the varied colors afterwards applied. Then the flesh parts were tinted; a reddish-brown color was given to the hair; the eyes and lips were suitably marked; and bright tones were applied to the dress, usually marking a contrast between different garments;

the borders, too, were colored in imitation of the borders of real garments. Although so much of this color, which was never subjected to any firing, has decayed or faded, enough remains to remind us that the aspect of a Greek city, in this particular, must have been



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* Figure 4 reproduces a Corinthian statuette, illustrating the indefinite lines of figures which were not retouched after moulding.



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no less picturesque and varied than that of any Levantine city of to-day. On the statuettes the use of reds, blues, and bright pinks is predominant, together with the darker colors applied to the borders of garments.

What are the subjects, what is the origin of the artistic types of the completed figures which our coroplast displays on his shelves?

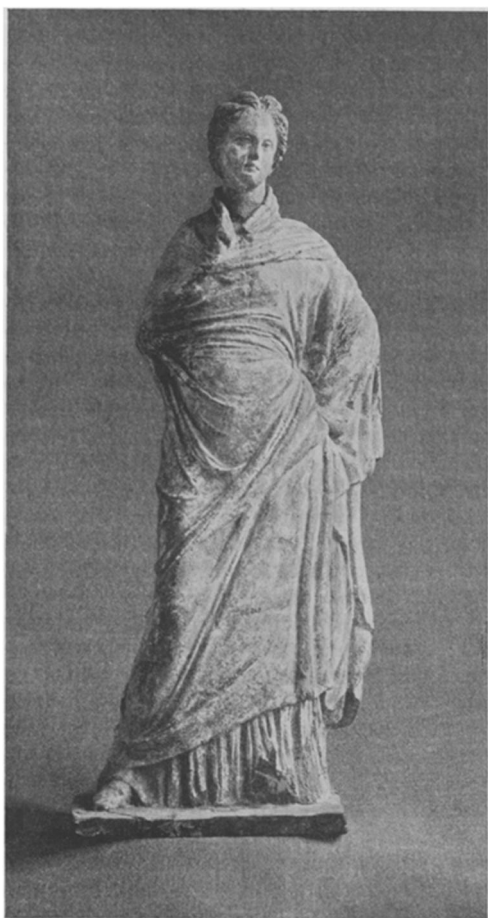
Of subjects, we notice first of all that the types of women and girls are by far the most numerous. Here and there are young men and boys: the athlete returning from the palaestra, for instance, with the strigil in his hand (Figure 1). Children are perhaps more common (Figure 5), and occasionally there is a type which suggests caricature, like that of the old nurse carrying a child in her arms (Figure 6), or a shaggy satyr who brings a basket of grapes to the vintage. Aphrodite and Eros are almost the only divinities who are distinctly characterized, and even these approximate *genre* types; one of the most charming of such representations is the Eros sleeping by a roadside Herm (Figure 7). Representations of stories in heroic myth are the least frequent of all; but a group in the Museum collection, showing a veiled woman gazing at two children who lie wrapped in swaddling bands at the foot of the rock on which she sits, has been interpreted as Tyro and her twin sons, Pelias and Neleus (Figure 8).

When Tanagra figurines are mentioned, however, one's first thought is always of the ladies who stand and walk with such natural grace, or sit in easy conversation or in momentary quiet. If we were to ask the coroplast why he chose to model these, he might say that in the first place such subjects always had been predominant, and that, moreover, the draped female figures were much more easily shaped in a mould than the male figures, which, being seldom entirely clad, demanded the use of several moulds for separate arms and legs. The predominance of the female type from early times, however, had its historical origin in the

worship of goddesses, to whom votive offerings, in the shape of small terra-cotta statuettes, were made by thousands. Uncounted numbers of rude figures of the goddess Hera were found, for instance, at her famous shrine in Argos; and in the early graves of Boeotia, of Tanagra itself, the board-like images of a crowned goddess are by far the most common. Several of these are exhibited in the Archaic Room (Case 3). Indeed, with the historical perspective in view, we are led to ask whether the fourth century figures represent simply human beings, or whether they are not modernized forms of divinities. Some archaeologists have believed this to be the fact, but the theory has not been proved. It is not the costume of the figures which decides the question,—the Greeks dressed their gods in garments approximately of their day,—but rather the way in which it is worn; the mien and bearing of these persons are distinctly human, not divine. There is no reason to differentiate the interpretation of the female figures from that of the athletes or the children playing games, so obviously representing contemporary human types. The art of the fourth century indeed humanized the conception of the gods; we see this in the types of Praxitelean sculpture. But the distinction between human and divine could hardly have vanished so utterly that one could not discriminate between the representations of gods and men. It seems that the maker of the figures and their buyers in general had no other thought than that of pleasant miniature reproductions of the life of their own day, except, of course, when the divine character of the subject is explicitly indicated. They might be used as ornaments of the house; they might accompany the



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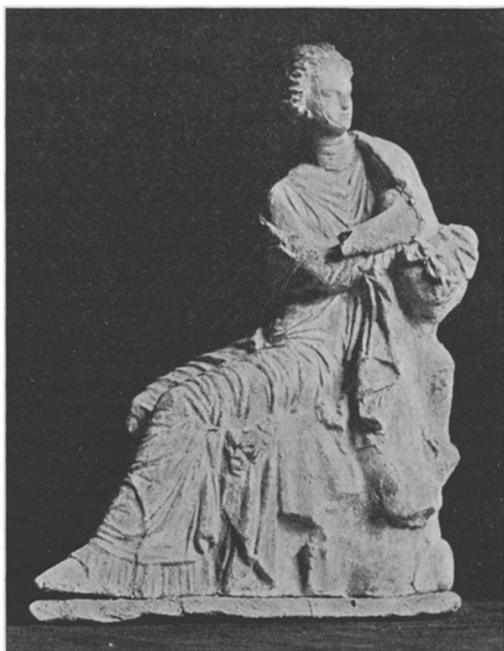
owner or his friends to the grave, according to an immemorial custom, inherited from a more religious age, when the figures of divinities were so employed. Even in early times, however, the *genre* figures were by no means excluded; witness the little groups in the Archaic Room — the barber, the wood-carrier, and others. To the Greek there was no inappropriateness in the vividly contemporary objects that were placed in graves. He may have thought more or less definitely that he was perpetuating the life and the living interests of his friend or kinsman by placing these reminders of terrestrial existence in the tomb. Even the Attic grave monuments, though generally on a higher emotional plane than the figurines, often reproduce scenes of no specifically funereal import.

I have already suggested that one cause of the increased use of terra-cottas in the graves of the fourth century was the decay of the arts of pottery and vase-painting, of which so many examples were placed in the earlier graves. It appears that the coroplast succeeded naturally to the taste and the artistic types of the later vase-painter. In the development of vase-painting in the fifth century it is quite apparent that the athletic and religious or

mythological types of the earlier style of red-figured vases are gradually displaced by *genre* subjects, most frequently ladies busied with ornaments and mirrors, among their attendants and friends, accompanied now and then by an Eros. Such a change of decorative motive is only one of the minor consequences of a general change of emphasis in Greek life: the withdrawal of attention from heroic tradition, from civic affairs, to private interests. At first thought two facts could hardly seem more unrelated than the conquest of Greece by Philip of Macedon and the contemporary production at Tanagra and elsewhere in Greece of these attractive terra-cotta images, which seem to reflect an existence quite undisturbed by the profounder currents of political and social change; yet there is a connection. The Greeks of an earlier day, those who surrounded themselves with reminders of the heroic legends or with images of the palaestra, would hardly have admitted the Macedonian conquest as easily as the Greeks of the fourth century. The old belief in the gods and the old faith in civic ideals had given place to a rather self-indulgent individualism which made the domination of a Philip or an Alexander necessary.

We may conclude, then, that unless there is some specific indication of other meaning, the Tanagra figurines were made and understood as contemporary *genre* types.

In the most numerous class of figures — that of women and girls — we notice great variety in the arrangement of dress together with the greatest simplicity in the elements which compose it. There are indeed generally not more than two garments: the first, a long tunic or chiton, fastened at the



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shoulders, girt at the waist, and falling to the feet—this of relatively thin material; the second, an ample mantle, or himation, usually of heavier stuff, which on the walking and standing figures, generally supposed to be outdoors, often envelopes the body so entirely as to leave only the lower border of the chiton visible, and is subject to every arrangement of which a large shawl is capable, sometimes adjusted to cover both arms and hands, sometimes leaving one hand free, and held in position, it appears, solely by its own weight, without pins or clasps. Outdoors, a lady might often draw the mantle over her head, and even veil the lower part of the face. Simple wide-brimmed hats with pointed crowns were worn, too, apparently pinned either to the hair or to the fold of the himation which passed over the head. Often the ladies carry fans of leaf-shape. They wear shoes, sometimes painted yellow, with red soles.

The subjects of the coroplast's art are, we have concluded, contemporary; but how far has he taken his types directly from life, and how far are they affected by the intermediary influence of the greater art of monumental sculpture? Perhaps the maker of terra-cottas could hardly have given an answer. He may have fancied that his little models were copied from natural forms. But the fact is that the lesser arts do not escape the influence of the greater. It is impossible to

reproduce nature; one or another form of convention is employed; and, consciously or unconsciously, the minor artist accepts the formula of contemporary monumental art. This is what is meant when we say that the Tanagra figures echo the style of fourth century sculpture in Athens. In fact, the physical forms, the forms of dress, and the types of attitude and motion, are not originated by the coroplast, but are borrowed from the art of sculpture in marble and bronze.

Observe, first of all, the physical type (Figures 1, 9, 10). The form is usually tall and slender, less grave, bodily and spiritually, than the fifth century type of figure; the head is often small in relation to the height. These characteristics remind us of the canon of proportions followed by the sculptors of the latter part of the fourth century, contrasted in just these respects with that of the earlier schools. The most familiar example is the normal athletic figure by Lysippus, in contrast with the normal athletic figure by Polyclitus a century earlier. But we may see the same contrast in the female types. Compare with a fifth century type, such as one of the Caryatids of the Erechtheum, the well-known statues from Herculaneum, now in Dresden, which are copies of fourth century statues, usually attributed to the school of Praxiteles. The difference of proportion corresponds to that of the male types. Examined still further, the shape of the heads of the terra-cotta figures is that of the type developed by sculpture in the fourth century. The faces have a regular oval shape, where they are at all exactly modelled, and the head shows those unbroken outlines which are associated particularly with the art of Praxiteles; although it is perhaps truer to say that the tendency to such suave continuous lines found in Praxiteles its supreme exemplar. The foreheads are regularly quite high, the hair is ordered as in the fourth century statues, either parted high on the forehead and carried back over the ears (Figure 8) or more elaborately arranged in parallel ridges (Figure 9).



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We shall not expect any special subtlety in the features of these small clay figures, but may remark again that they are surprisingly definite, and that this definition contributes to their expressiveness. The comparatively rare male types show as close a relation to the Attic art of sculpture of the fourth century. Their forms, so far as they are carefully considered, are not unlike those of Praxitelean statues; notice in Figure 1, for example, the shape and proportion of the forehead and the rough sketching of the athlete's short, curly hair.

We have already discussed the forms of dress, as based on the actual fashions of the fourth century. It may be noted here that the sculpture of the period also made use of these contemporary forms. But not only the fashion of dress is different from that of earlier sculpture; the spirit of its execution is different. There is less regard to abstract design of drapery; more to its actual behavior as affected by the forms and movements of the body. The design is often beautiful; but it is more subordinated to reality than in earlier sculpture.

Along with this more strict regard to actual appearances, there comes an increased freedom in the composition and the implied motion of the figure. It has been noted that the tendency to reproduce the human form in a view which should present as nearly as possible a simple plane to the eyes of the spectator persisted a long time in the sculpture of the Greeks; its influence may be seen even in work as late as that of Praxiteles. We might fairly expect such a tendency to be reflected in these terra-cottas, which are so obviously meant to be seen only from the front. But, curiously enough, they keep step with the advancing capacity of the sculptors of the end of the fourth century. Not only is every attitude of walking and standing represented,—as early as the end of the fifth century there was a considerable freedom in motion,—but the arms are also very freely disposed; the hand now rests so far back on the hip that the position of the whole body is altered (Figure 11); or, again, the arm is bent in front of the body in positions quite unknown to earlier sculpture (Figures 8, 10). This destruction of the plane parallel to the eye, so persistently maintained in earlier art, this complete realization of the tri-dimensional character of sculpture, was not attained before the period of Lysippus.* The attitude of his *Apoxyomenos*, with arm projected straight towards the spectator, would hardly have been ventured upon by an earlier school.

The definition of the subjects of these terra-cotta figures, and of their relation to the greater art of sculpture, does not explain, however, their peculiar and characteristic charm. While works in this material and size, made in part by mechanical means, are not capable of the noblest significance or the most exquisite refinements of form, they have in compensation a range of expression which is their own, and which would probably not be tolerated in the greater arts. If they cannot be as

serious as sculpture, it is no less true that sculpture cannot safely be as frivolous as they. They can fitly mirror the lighter and more superficial phases of human existence in ancient Greece. They attract, too, by the very multiplicity of their types, suggesting to the eye that looks on one and then another how fascinating the kaleidoscopic shifting of form and color, seen on the streets of Athens or Tanagra or Thebes, must have been. For whatever the material origin of these figures, they do not represent a local or provincial type, but rather the generally accepted Hellenic fashion in dress and manner. This veritable relation to Greek life is another element of their effectiveness. In this they are different from some modern objects with which they have been compared. One author* compares the graceful and whimsical porcelain figures of Meissen and other eighteenth century fabrics to the Tanagra figures. But the likeness is hardly more striking than the difference. The products of Meissen and Chelsea and Bow were costly bits of porcelain designed to please the taste of the rich, either with fancifully idealized representations of an idyllic country life or with whimsical *genre* types, or perhaps with representations of classic myths in a grandiloquent manner unsuited to the materials and methods of such an art. Delightful as these porcelain figures often are, they reflect an existence no more real than the fancied pastoral life of the court at Versailles. It is a merit of the Tanagra figures that, while no less gay and spirited, they record unpretentiously a genuine and natural as well as an essentially beautiful type of civilization.

S. N. D.

* Pottier: "Diphilos," p. 62.

Notes

THE ACQUISITIONS of the Harvard University—Museum of Fine Arts Egyptian Expedition, 1906–11, shown temporarily in the Forecourt Room, are now arranged in the first section of the Mastaba Gallery. Here the objects from the predynastic cemetery at Mesa'eed, the fourth dynasty temples of Mycerinus at Gizeh, and the fourth and fifth dynasty cemetery of Cheops at Gizeh are brought into their proper relation to previous acquisitions of like date, giving an unusually comprehensive exhibition of the best work of the Old Empire.

THE EXHIBITION of work of members of the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts and its associate organizations was opened in the Forecourt Room on May 17, and will continue through Sunday, June 11.

AN EXHIBITION of the work of recent graduates of the Museum School opened in the Third Modern Picture Gallery on Saturday, June 3, and will continue through the month.

* Loewy: "Nature in Greek Art" (trans. by Fothergill), p. 87.